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The Legendary Don Juan: A Possible Source for Chaucer's "The Shipman's Tale"

Raychel Haugrud Reiff

1 "Don Juan", "Daun John"--the names sound almost identical. The first is the name of the legendary Spanish seducer; the second is the name of Chaucer's seducer in "The Shipman's Tale". Although it is possible that choosing almost identical names for the two libertines is merely coincidental, looking more closely at Chaucer's story, it is clear that there are additional similarities between the two works. For example, Chaucer's plot follows the traditional Don Juan story line: the male lover ingratiates himself into the family of a beautiful woman, seduces the lady, abandons her, and goes merrily on his way. Furthermore, the main character of Chaucer's tale is very much like the traditional Don Juan: both are charming, manipulative men who obtain love through lies and deceits but are capable of talking their way out of trouble. Of course, even though they have committed crimes against women, society, and the church, they feel no guilt.

2 Even a cursory plot summary of Chaucer's tale shows the remarkable similarities to the Don Juan legend. A handsome, young, gracious French monk named Daun John is best of friends with a merchant who has a beautiful but spendthrift wife. Always welcome at their home, Daun John visits often and is loved by everyone. One day, in a secret meeting with the wife, Daun John promises to give her money to pay her debts for expensive clothes she has purchased, and she agrees to repay him with a night in bed. Still feigning friendship with the husband, Daun John goes to him and asks to borrow the money. As a true friend, the merchant loans him the money.

3 After both of them leave, Daun John, unknown to anyone, returns to the home with the merchant's money, gives it to the wife, spends the night with her, and departs. When next he sees the merchant, Daun John tells him that he repaid the loan, leaving the money with his wife. After the gullible merchant mildly rebukes his wife for not telling him of the repaid loan, the quick-thinking wife replies that she has already spent the money

which she thought was a gift from their friend and tells her husband she will repay him with many happy nights. Thus the merchant has paid for a sexual liaison between his wife and his friend, while Daun John has slept with a lady and lost nothing. He is still seen as the good friend, gracious monk, and ideal man (Chaucer VII 1434). With such striking similarities in name, plot, and character between Chaucer's Daun John and the legendary Don Juan, it seems plausible that Chaucer, writing several centuries before the first generally recognized writer of the Don Juan story, used the Don Juan legend as a source for "The Shipman's Tale". This fourteenth-century tale, then, would be the earliest appearance of Don Juan in literary form.

4 Even though critics have long puzzled about Chaucer's source for "The Shipman's Tale", no one has mentioned the Don Juan legend as a possibility. For years, experts focused on Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Sercambi's *Novelle* as Chaucer's probable models since the plots are similar (Benson, "Explanatory Notes" 910-911; Pratt 142-145, Tatlock 91, Guerin 412-419, McGrady 1-26).[1] But others have questioned these works as sources, stating that there is no proof that Chaucer knew either one (Benson and Andersson 277-278; Baugh 334).[2] With these known tales discredited, critics have suggested that an old, now lost, French fabliau was Chaucer's source (Winnick 185, French 233; Benson and Andersson 278, Baugh 334). However, most present experts dismiss this suggestion as a mere guess rather than a serious explanation since no such work has ever materialized (Winnick 184).[3] Because no direct source can be found, many critics now feel that Chaucer borrowed bits and pieces from a number of medieval sources and wove them together to make an original work.[4]

5 The newest school of thought–that the tale is an original work drawn from many medieval stories–opens the possibility that one source for "The Shipman's Tale" is the legend of the libertine Don Juan.[5]

6 Chaucer certainly develops the monk into a typical Don Juan-like man. Like Don Juan, he is seen by everyone as an ideal person. "Fair" (VII 25), "boold" (VII 25), and "yonge" (VII 28), the monk ingratiates himself with the husband, claiming him for "cosynage" (VII 36) and swearing eternal brotherhood (VII 42). To gain popularity in his household, he generously gives money to everyone, even the leeste page" (VII 46). Courteous, generous, and pleasing, the monk makes himself welcome at the merchant's home, and everyone thinks he is a wonderful person.

7 But Chaucer quickly reveals that the monk, like Don Juan, is not what he appears to be. Rather than a celibate, pure monk, he is a bawdy man whose thoughts easily turn to sex. Improperly, he talks privately to the wife about her sexual life with her husband, making crude comments about their busy nights when they "laboured" in bed (VII 108). Like Don Juan, the monk acts in secrecy. He encourages the wife to tell him her marriage troubles in "secree" (VII 130), and they "sworn" (VII 141) to never tell anyone else. Like Don Juan, Daun John is a sweet-talking seducer. When he thinks he can win the favors of the lady, he renounces his brotherhood with the merchant (VII 149-152), announces to the wife that he has "loved [her] specially / Aboven all wommen" (VII 153-154), accepts her pledge to "doon to [him] what plesance and service / That [she] may doon" (VII 191-192), and addresses her in knightly love terms by calling her "myn owene deere lady" (VII 196).

8 Next Chaucer shows that, like Don Juan, he is an active sexual predator, a man of action. Before sharing secrets, the monk and the wife "kiste" (VII 141), and to solidify their promise, "he caughte hire by the flankes, / And hire embraceth harde, and kiste her often" (VII 202-203).

9 In the next scene, the monk, like Don Juan, is seen as a deceptive, cunning betrayer. Having just plotted to have a sexual liaison with the wife, he conducts a religious service, a "messe" (VII 25 1), eats the husband's rich food (VII 254), twice blesses the man he plans to betray (VII 259, 264), promises to give him anything he desires (VII 265-268), four times calls him by the endearing term "cosyn" (VII 257, 260, 264, 279), borrows the money he needs from the husband to gain the wife's favor (VII 269-280), and pretends great friendship with the husband as they "drynke" (VII 297), "speke" (VII 297), and "rome a while and pleye" (VII 297). The monk's deceptive nature becomes even more apparent when he returns to the merchant's house to spend the night with the wife with no one's knowledge (VII 308-324) and later acts like a great friend, entertaining the husband with "feeste and murye cheere" (VII 341) and once again addressing him as "cosyn" (VII 364).

10 Also, like Don Juan, Daun John abandons his lover with no thought for her well-being. His lack of concern is apparent when he tells the husband he has repaid the loan, leaving the money with the merchant's wife (VII 349-360), who now has to try to explain the situation to her husband without getting herself into trouble. Having had his way with the lady and getting away with no penalty, Daun John, like Don Juan, leaves town (VII 3 6 1).

11 Although it might be possible that the similarities in name, plot, and character are merely accidental, such does not appear to be the case. Chaucer seems to deliberately emphasize the name "Daun John" in his tale. Forty-one times Chaucer refers to the seducer by using a noun, twenty-three of those times calling him the proper name, "Daun John" (VII 43, 58, 68, 89, 98, 158, 187, 221, 255, 282, 294, 296, 298, 308, 312, 314, 319, 322, 337, 342, 349, 387, 402), while referring to him by his profession, "monk," only eleven times (VII 25, 28, 34, 36, 62, 74, 124, 148, 195, 254, 402). Of the other seven references, six times he is addressed with the endearing term "cosyn" by the gullible merchant (VII 69, 98, 114, 143, 282, 387), and once he is called "deere love" by his lover (VII 158). In contrast, Chaucer almost always talks about the other male protagonist, the woman's husband, whom he refers to with nouns thirty-five times, by using the terms of his profession, calling him "merchant" seventeen times (Vll 1, 20, 53, 74, 75, 281, 296, 299, 302, 305, 307, 325, 332, 365, 377, 382, 427) and "chapman" four times (VII 226, 254, 256, 288). Sometimes he refers to his marital status, describing him as "housbonde" four times (VII 161, 184, 199, 212) and "spouse" once (VII 425). Other times Chaucer refers to his internal qualities, addressing him as "goode man" three times (VII 29, 33, 107). The duplicitous monk addresses him using the endearing term "cosyn" five times (VII 257, 260, 264, 279, 364). But his proper name, "Peter", Chaucer uses only once (VII 214). The third major character, the woman love-interest, is not even given a proper name. Of the twenty-five times she is addressed, eighteen times she is merely called "wyf" (VII 3, 22, 60, 92, 112, 124, 163, 212, 224, 241, 3 27, 357, 373, 378, 384, 395, 400, 430), twice she is "dame" (VII 356, 363), once she is "lady" (VII 196), and four times the monk calls her "nece" (VII 100, 106, 125, 363).

12 Looking at it another way, of the twenty-four times Chaucer uses a proper name for his characters, twenty-three are "Daun John". With this emphasis, Chaucer forces the reader to focus on the name "Daun John", the name of the seducer. Although the other two characters, the wife who is the object of Daun John's lust and the husband who is the man who must be outwitted, are necessary to the plot, their names, obviously, are unimportant. The womanizer Daun John, then, is the only character in the story whose name is important. It surely seems possible that Chaucer expects his readers to identify the seducer in his tale with the legendary womanizer, Don Juan.

13 Chaucer's choice of the name "Daun John" for his protagonist of "The Shipman's Tale" seems intentional because it is not a name Chaucer uses in any other tale. To be sure, there are characters with the common name "John" in other tales–*Millers*, *Reeve's*, and *Summoners*—and "John" is used as a general name for a cleric in various places in *The Canterbury Tales*. But without the title "Daun", the name does not have the connotations of the legendary seducer–"John" is an ordinary male while "Daun John" is a libertine.

14 Another way Chaucer shows that he wants his readers to identify the monk with Don Juan is that he uses the proper name "Daun John" more and more frequently as the story progresses and the monk reveals his true nature. When Chaucer first introduces the man, he is neutral, four times calling him by the term "monk" (VII 25, 28, 34, 36). But as soon as the monk is shown to be a clever manipulator who knows how to win people's affections, Chaucer begins calling him "Daun John", doing so three times (VII 43, 58, 68) while calling him "monk" only twice (VII 62, 74). Chaucer continues using the nouns in much the same way at the beginning of the seduction scene in the garden, interweaving the two terms but using "Daun John" more frequently. The sequence is as follows: "Daun John" (VII 89), "Daun John" (VII 98), "monk" (VII 124), "monk" (VII 148), "Daun John" (VII 158), "monk" (VII 187), "Daun John" (VII 195), "Daun John" (VII 220), "monk" (VII 254). Once this scene is completed and the monk puts his plan into action by asking the merchant for the money, sleeping with the wife, and telling the merchant he has repaid the loan, Chaucer refers to him almost exclusively as "Daun John", using the proper name fifteen times (VII 255, 282, 294, 296, 298, 308, 312, 314, 319, 322, 337, 342, 349, 387, 402). The only time he is called "monk" is when the deceived wife calls him "false monk, daun John" (VII 402). This is the last time he is mentioned in the tale. Thus, in over the last third of "The Shipman's Tale", after the monk has shown his true nature as a deceptive libertine, Chaucer uses only the proper name "Daun John" to refer to him, except for calling him a "false monk" once (VII 402). It seems most probable that Chaucer's readers would respond to this name by having a good laugh. They, like present-day readers, would no longer see the man as a noble monk, for he is "Daun John", known currently as "Don Juan", a libertine and a rake!

15 Clearly, "The Shipman's Tale" has many similarities to the Don Juan legend in name, plot, and characterization. But, is the legend of Don Juan as old as Chaucer? Could Chaucer have known this legend? Would medieval people have known the story so that they would have shared in Chaucer's humor, typecasting the French monk as a womanizer as soon as they heard the name "Daun John"?

16 The tale of Don Juan as we know it today was first published in the early seventeenth century under the title *El Burlador de Sevilla*, the work most critics cite as the first literary appearance of Don Juan.[6] A Spaniard, most likely Tirso de Molina, wrote of a man of Seville who had one escapade after another with women. This story has been further popularized by other writers, particularly Mozart in his opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), Lord Byron in his epic satire *Don Juan* (1819-1824), and G. B. Shaw in the scene "Don Juan in Hell" in *Man and Superman* (1903), as well as by Molière in his play *Don Juan* (1665), Jose Zorrilla y Moral in his drama *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844), and Richard Strauss in his tone poem *Don Juan* (1888) ("Don Juan", *Benet*'s; "Don Juan Tenorio", Bleznick; Grote). The story of a Spanish libertine from Seville named Don Juan is the story we know today.

17 But obviously Chaucer could not have known the Don Juan work written by Tirso de Molina more than two centuries after his death. We need to examine whether Chaucer could have known the tale in an earlier version. This, indeed, is a possibility. Critics agree that the seventeenth-century Spanish play is based on a legend that began in medieval

times in Europe (critics do not cite a country of origin) and was common folklore. One critic writes, "Don Juan was a figure in the folklore of many European countries before he first appeared in literature in the play *El burlador*" (Bleznick). Others add that Don Juan is a tale "originating in popular legend" ("Don Juan", *Britannia*) "in Europe during the Middle Ages" (Sieber). That the legend was well-known can be seen in the number of literary pieces published in the seventeenth century, works depicting a libertine named Don Juan who was Spanish or French or Italian, depending on the nationality of the author.[7] Therefore, it seems very possible that Chaucer could have heard this tale about a man named "Daun John" of France or "Don Juan" of Spain or Italy, or similar names from almost any European country. Thus, as late as the mid-seventeenth century, Don Juan was not necessarily Spanish, nor was his occupation of any importance. He was merely an unscrupulous womanizer. Chaucer's libertine, a French monk, was a perfectly acceptable Don Juan character in the late fourteenth century.

18 Since he was a well-traveled man, Chaucer had many opportunities to hear legends known throughout Europe. We certainly would imagine that this great story writer would have been attuned to stories that he heard as he journeyed from country to country, traveling to France with the English army in 1359-60, to Spain on "affairs touching the forthcoming war" in 1366, to Milan with Prince Lionel in 1367, to the continent on matters touching the war with France in 1370, to Genoa and Florence in 1372-73, to the continent at least three times on matters of peace and the king's marriage in 1376-77, to France to arrange the king's marriage in 1377, to Lombardy in 1378, and to Calais in 1387 (Howard 506-509). To all of these places Chaucer traveled before writing the second phase of *Canterbury Tales* in 1389-93, the section which begins with "The Shipman's Tale" (Howard 509).

19 Even if the tale originated in Spain, which is not at all certain, Chaucer still had the opportunity to hear it. After all, Chaucer traveled to Spain in 1366 to support Don Pedro. Here he would have had the opportunity to hear of the Don Juan legendary figure (Howard 114).[8] Also, he and his wife knew John of Gaunt's Spanish wife, Constance, daughter of Don Pedro of Spain. In fact, Philippi, Chaucer's wife, was in service to the Duchess Constance; this surely could have provided another opportunity for Chaucer to hear of the Spanish dissolute lover (Howard 507). Furthermore, as controller of export tax and customs for years beginning in 1374 (Rossignol 74), Chaucer had the opportunity to meet and talk with people from all over Europe, people who could have told him the legend of Don Juan. Chaucer, traveling in many countries in Europe, including Spain, and meeting with foreigners at home, could have heard the Don Juan legend that began in Europe during medieval times and was common folklore.

20 Chaucer also establishes that the speaker of the tale, the Shipman, could have heard of the Don Juan story, since it is a legend known throughout Europe. Like Chaucer, the Shipman travels widely, including taking trips to Spain. He is from "Deartemouth" (I 389) in the southwest corner of England and has traveled fom "Hulle" (I 404) on the Yorkshire Coast to "Cartage" (I 404), referrring either to a city in Tunisia or to Cartagena in Spain;[9] he knows every inlet in "Britaigne" (I 409), Brittany, and in "Spayne". Such a well-traveled man certainly had access to the story of Don Juan. Also, since he is a rugged, daring sailor, he would probably appreciate the story of a handsome, dashing man who is able to steal what he wants (in this case the favors of a woman) and get by without being caught. It makes a perfect fabliau for the Shipman to tell.

21 It seems, then, that Chaucer does have a source for "The Shipman's Tale" and that people living in the late fourteenth century were treated to the first known work of literature based on the Don Juan legend: a fabliau set in France telling the tale of a lecherous monk, Chaucer's "The Shipman's Tale".

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NOTES

1. . Benson states: "The closest extant analogue is Boccaccio's *Decameron* 8.1 (8.2 is a similar story). A version preserved in Sercambi's Novella 19... perhaps gave Chaucer some ideas... Guerin (*ES* 52, 1971, 412-19) suggests that he used all three Italian versions" (Benson, Explanatory Notes 910).

2. . Even though Benson and Andersson see a resemblance to Boccaccio's and Sercambi's works, they declare that there is no evidence that Chaucer knew the *Decameron* or Sercambi's *Novelle* (277-278). Baugh agrees: "A similar story is told by Boccaccio in the *Decameron* (the first story of the eighth day and by Sercambi in his *Novelle* (No. 19), but it is unlikely that Chaucer knew either of these collections" (334).

3. . According to Winnick, "The lost French fabliau argument was first advanced by John Webster Spargo in *Chaucer's Shipmans Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained*, Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 91 (Helsinki, 1930 (Winnick 185). French speculates that the tale may be drawn from a French fabliau (233). Benson and Andersson cite a lost French fabliau as a possible source (278). Baugh writes: "Chaucer's source was probably an old French fabliau which has not come down to us" (334). However, none of these authors is certain that a French fabliau ever existed. Winnick himself states that critics should "call off the search for the tale's missing fabliau source, almost verbatim or otherwise, for that source probably does not and never did exist" (184).

4. . Benson and Andersson point out that "Chaucer alone is probably responsible for the most notable characteristics of this tale" (278), while French states that there is no direct source for this tale (233).

That Chaucer uses a variety of plots in this tale seems to be the most prevalent view at the present time. See McGrady; Davenport; Donaldson; Benson and Andersson; and Winnick. McGrady states that Chaucer's "use of models was a complex one, normally consisting of the amalgamation of elements from several sources" (10-11). Davenport reiterates this idea: "This uncertainty about origins [for many tales including "The Shipman's Tale" suggests that Chaucer's tales of contemporary life were versions of anecdotes and tales in general circulation, that is, literary versions of the oral and improvisatory" (74). Donaldson sees that this tale is "a very old folk-tale known as 'The Lover's Gift Regained', which appears in many languages and in many versions" (1095). Benson and Andersson publish a number of variations on the tale. And Winnick talks about the possibility that Chaucer used a number of different sources for the tale, thus creating "an important and original work taking the outward form of a familiar comic genre" (165).

5. . Armond E. Singer, who compiled a bibliography of works containing the Don Juan theme, recognizes Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale" as one work having a Don Juan-like figure written before 1623 when Tirso de Molina wrote the *Burlador* (Singer 4).

6. . Most critics consistently state that Don Juan's first appearance in any literary form was in Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador*, which was written, according to some critics, as early as 1616 or, according to other critics, as late as 1630. See "Don Juan", *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia*, Grote, and Bleznick.

However, Otto Rank cites an earlier work as the original: "The oldest appearance of Don Juan in world literature is a Spanish comedy, now apparently lost, that appeared about the end of the sixteenth century. The *Burlador* is a slightly altered form of this play" (Rank 103).

7. . Peyre, of Yale University, says that the French dramatist Molière, writing his play *Don Juan* in 1664 "was probably unaware of the original Spanish play (published 1630) by the monk Tirso de Molina and of an Italian adaptations of the Spanish work, but he may have been familiar with two French adaptations of the Italian version--by Claude de Villiers in 1659 and Nicolas Dorimond in 1661".

8. . Clearly Chaucer knew of the Spanish ruler Don Pedro since Chaucer journeyed to Spain in 1366 to support his cause. Later Chaucer praised him in "The Monk's Tale".

9. . See Benson, "Textual Notes" 30, note 404.

ABSTRACTS

Le présent article remet en cause la thèse selon laquelle Don Juan apparaît pour la première fois en littérature dans une Comedia espagnole du XVIe siècle. L'hypothèse selon laquelle Chaucer est le premier auteur à utiliser la légende médiévale du fond folklorique occidental de Don Juan pour créer Daun John, moine séducteur du "Shipman's Tale", n'est pas à exclure. Le triangle traditionnel du mari, de la femme et de l'amant évoque, dans ce conte, nombre de détails de la légende médiévale de Don Juan que Chaucer, grand voyageur devant l'éternel, peut avoir entendu lors de ses périples. Chez Chaucer, la femme est abandonnée par Daun John qui, comme le Don Juan de la légende, est séducteur, manipulateur et trompeur. Si Chaucer répète vingt-trois fois le nom de Daun John (alors qu'il mentionne une seule fois le nom du mari et laisse la femme anonyme) c'est probablement pour établir un lien entre la légende médiévale et son récit. Si, en effet, Chaucer tire son personnage de Daun John de la légende de Don Juan, alors le moine séducteur du "Shipman's Tale" est bien la première apparition en littérature de Don Juan.

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